

War Optimism in the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: A Cause for Pessimism?

Lennon, Olena

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Blame-Shifting

If Putin is determined to invade despite the risks to his own stability, we can expect him to do everything he can to minimize these risks by making it look like he is not the one who “started it.” While he could try to claim Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky attacked first, much as Russia blamed Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili for striking first in the August 2008 war, this is quite unlikely to be credible, in part because Zelensky is best known in Russia as a Russian-language comedy actor rather than a hot-headed Ukrainian nationalist.

More consistent with resonant narratives in Russia today would be for Russian forces to “support” some kind of force claiming to be “restoring constitutional order” in Ukraine after what Russia has called the fascist “coup” of 2014. This is because this line would be consistent with Putin’s longstanding self-presentation in Russia as a cooperation-supporting moderate rather than a hardline invader. There is still little reason to believe that ordinary Russians would be very happy to spill their own children’s blood or sacrifice their own

standards of living for the sake of Ukraine’s “constitutional order.” But the US and its partners should nevertheless be careful to avoid actions that would help make this scenario more credible within Russia. Unfortunately, the movement of U.S. troops closer to Ukraine but (crucially) still not actually into Ukraine might actually help Putin in this way, without providing any significant deterrent effect.

Conclusion

If Putin understands all this, as one hopes he does, perhaps he will not invade after all. He could easily back down and lose little in domestic political standing even without a deal, perhaps coming out stronger for having shown the West how serious he is about Russia’s concerns. So he may very well be bluffing. But it remains possible he does not understand. Leaders frequently take actions that undercut their own support in the longer run. In that case, he may yet pay a price.

Submitted on 15 February 2022

About the Author

Henry E. Hale is a leading specialist on Russian public opinion, the author of the book *Patronal Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2014), and the recipient of two prizes from the American Political Science Association for his research. He is Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at George Washington University’s Institute for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (IERES) and co-director of PONARS Eurasia.

Further Reading

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COMMENTARY

War Optimism in the Russia–Ukraine Conflict: A Cause for Pessimism?

By Olena Lennon (University of New Haven)

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Russia’s military buildup around Ukraine—which has triggered the most serious tensions between Russia and the West since the end of the Cold War—has moved to a critical phase in recent days. Citing new intelligence, the White House warned that Russia was preparing to “mount a major military action in Ukraine any day.” While the Ukrainian leaders have finally acknowledged the threat of a large-scale offen-

sive, they have continued to downplay its imminence, appealing for calm even after the U.S. government and other countries ordered most of their personnel to leave Ukraine immediately.

Since the start of the escalation, the Ukrainian leadership’s calm disposition has been simultaneously lauded and criticized: lauded for preventing a (costly) premature mobilization and attempting to protect Ukraine’s

national currency and markets; criticized for wasting critical time that could have been used to prepare for war and facilitate civilian evacuations. Facing a formidable aggressor, Ukraine's president, Volodymyr Zelensky, has seemed unfazed by the ominous signs of potential bloodshed—as has Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, who is considered the aggressor. In their own ways, both leaders seem to be suffering from war optimism—a form of self-deception that leads an individual to make overly optimistic judgments about their chances of achieving their objectives by inflating gains and downplaying risks. And while Zelensky's war optimism may be desperate and rooted in survival, in combination with Putin's belligerent and neo-imperial war optimism, it is highly flammable.

Zelensky's optimism is undoubtedly justifiable, as it may serve to facilitate the psychological and physical resilience of the struggling nation. But if optimism hinges on delusion, especially in life-or-death situations, it can lead to devastating consequences. One need look no further than Armenia's recent defeat in the Second Nagorno-Karabakh War, which could, in no small measure, be attributed to its leaders' simultaneous overestimation of their strengths and underestimation of their opponent.

Zelensky's war optimism comes primarily from three sources: Ukraine's improved military capabilities, international support, and high levels of national patriotism and mobilization.

Ukraine's combat readiness and effectiveness have indeed improved since 2014. Ukraine's modernized military equipment, produced both domestically and internationally, combined with better-trained troops—as a result of both battlefield experience and NATO-led tactical training—have elevated Ukraine's armed forces to one of the best militaries in Europe. The West's continued diplomatic, economic, and military support has also reassured and uplifted the Zelensky administration. Both the US and NATO have maintained their support for Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity, massively increasing shipments of defensive weapons and equipment in recent weeks.

No less clear has been the renewed sense of patriotism and resilience among the Ukrainian people. In a February 2022 poll, approximately 57 percent of Ukrainians said they would put up armed resistance in the event of a new Russian invasion. (Regional differences are noteworthy: readiness to resist varies from 72 percent in the West to 30 percent in the East.) Ukraine has also restructured its Territorial Defense Force—originally designed as a separate professional military branch—to recruit as many as two million citizens to help defend their homes and protect key civilian infrastructure. In a poll conducted in January of this year, 56 percent of Ukrainians said they would join the new force.

These developments can certainly boost morale and foster optimism, but, on close examination, may not be sufficient to counter Russian aggression at this time. First, Ukraine's defensive potential, while improved, stands a poor chance against Russia, due not least to gaps in Ukraine's air defense and electronic warfare capabilities. Next, Ukraine's current armed forces, at approximately 250,000 people, are only about a quarter as numerous as Russia's active-duty troops, not counting reserves, and will be hard pressed to sustain a ground invasion. Ukraine's national resistance movement, while inspiring, may not be helpful against Russia's well-armed conventional forces poised for a swift invasion and a potentially protracted occupation. Besides, as Dara Massicot, a senior policy researcher at the RAND Corporation, has noted, Russian strategy emphasizes a “short and intense ‘initial period of war’ that may produce decisive effects even before ground forces are fully committed.” Last, despite the West's support, fissures between European nations on issues of weapons transfers to Ukraine and sanctions against Russia have poured cold water on expectations of a unified Western front.

Zelensky's war optimism may be costly, but it is still a far cry from the devastating effects of Putin's war optimism. Traditionally, the majority of the Russian leadership's overconfidence has been rooted in Russia's military strength, especially since its recent modernization. Russia has also been able to sanction-proof its economy thanks to a conservative fiscal policy that has included weaning itself off the dollar and reducing the share of its debt held by foreign investors. In addition, the Kremlin optimistically believes that Europeans will make a rational choice in favor of stable and affordable Russian energy supplies and thus concede to some of Russia's geopolitical demands (such as blocking Ukraine's NATO membership).

The Kremlin's overconfidence has produced some blind spots as well. While the larger and more technologically advanced Russian force could overwhelm Ukraine's military and seize swaths of Ukrainian territory relatively quickly, with a possible goal of regime change in Kyiv, experts estimate that over time, manpower-intensive urban warfare would present a real challenge for the Kremlin. Additionally, while the Russians have the capabilities to defeat Ukrainian resistance movements, they might be underestimating the extent of the irreversible change Ukrainian society has undergone in terms of its pro-Western aspirations. In a February 2022 poll, the majority of Ukrainians said they were in favor of joining both the European Union and NATO (68 percent and 62 percent, respectively). Several studies have also shown that most Ukrainians reflect rather critically on the Soviet past and its legacy, especially compared to Russians. In other words, Putin may

not find the captive audience he is counting on for a pro-Russia regime to last. Besides, post-war reconstruction would put an enormous strain on Russia's budget, especially in the face of severe sanctions.

While it is true that so far Western sanctions have not succeeded in forcing the Kremlin to end aggression in Ukraine and prevent further escalation, the more punishing sanctions that the US and its European allies and partners have threatened to impose on Russia could cripple the Russian economy and inflict pain on its billionaires, government officials, and ordinary citizens alike.

Considering the many blind spots of war optimism, it is important that both Zelensky and Putin, as well as other political leaders, at a minimum take a pause to recognize their own and other actors' delusions and seek

to mitigate their effects by soliciting alternative sources of information and interpretations. Leaders should also ensure not only that the people around them feel comfortable reporting bad news, but also that the incentives for reporting factually accurate information are stronger than the incentives for "maintaining organizational silence."

As a flurry of diplomatic talks between Western leaders, Moscow, and Kyiv continues, all parties involved should consider very seriously the sources of their optimism about whether further violence will change the inevitability of political negotiations and concessions.

Submitted on 16 February 2022

About the Author

Olena Lennon, Ph.D., is a former Fulbright Scholar from Ukraine and currently an Adjunct Professor of Political Science and National Security at the University of New Haven.

COMMENTARY

Global Security and the Ukrainian Crisis

By Dmitry Stefanovich (IMEMO, Russian Academy of Sciences, Moscow)

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The dramatic recognition of the DNR and LNR as sovereign states will affect the developing security trends in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. However, it should not be seen as some sort of a 'grand finale' and 'full stop' signal to the ongoing process of re-shaping the international security order.

While highly symbolic, such a move by Russia seems to be only tactical, or operational at the most, intended to limit the military escalation scenarios around Donetsk and Lugansk. Strangely enough, during the emergency meeting of the UN Security Council, the Ambassadors of both Russia and Ukraine stated that the Minsk Agreements are still relevant. Of course, to keep the situation contained, or 'frozen' (who could have thought that this word can have a positive connotation), the hostilities along the contact line should cease, and, hopefully, it will happen as soon as the Russian Armed Forces are deployed in these Republics according to the relevant Agreements. The status of such deployment will remain contested for years to come, but this is a reality we will have to deal with. At the moment the situation is still developing, but the current crisis is not about Ukraine.

It is rooted in far greater issues of a European security architecture—or the absence of such.

Thus, the Russian strategic effort to negotiate so-called 'security guarantees', or rather re-negotiating the written and perceived 'terms' under which the Cold War ended, remains on the table. So far there has been some progress with the so-called 'secondary agenda', which includes very serious issues of arms control, transparency and confidence-building measures. If implemented, those can stabilize the situation in Europe, with a positive spill over to other regions of the world. Credit where credit is due, the US response to the Russian original proposal demonstrated that people in Washington properly tried to do their homework in that part. However, it is linked to broader issues of a political nature, the 'primary agenda'. The most crucial of those are the binding commitment by NATO to non-extension into the post-Soviet space and the degrading of NATO military infrastructure in the new member states to the status it had in 1997, as well as the withdrawal of foreign troops from those member states. All of these are heavily flavoured with the concept of indivisible secu-